

## 'This may be the most dangerous thing Donald Trump believes': eugenic populism and the American body politic

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# **“This May Be the Most Dangerous Thing Donald Trump Believes”: Eugenic Populism and the American Body Politic**

SUSAN CURRELL

## **Abstract**

The 2016 election of a self-declared eugenicist to the most powerful political role in the world signified a widespread and worrying forgetting of America's eugenic past. This essay shows how America's current president employs similar rhetorical and fictive devices to those employed by eugenicists and politicians in the 1920s and 1930s, strategies that he now uses to fuel his supremacist fantasies. By linking up Trump's lifelong belief in his genetic superiority (and thereby the apparent “truth” of eugenics more broadly) with earlier eugenic beliefs of the 1920s and 1930s, this paper explores how, despite being scientifically discredited, eugenics steadfastly remained a popular ideological staple of American meritocratic and supremacist belief.

In January 2018, the White House announced the results of Donald Trump's first annual health test as president. Media outlets reported that, despite the fact that “[h]e does not exercise, has a long history of eating McDonald's and drinking Diet Coke, and is just short of obese [...] Donald Trump's health is ‘excellent,’ his mind is ‘sharp’ and he only needs four or five hours’ sleep a night” (Smith). When reporters asked the navy doctor, Ronny Jackson, how a man who consumes fried fast food and Diet Coke and who does not exercise could be in good shape, the doctor replied: “[i]t's called genetics. [...] He has incredibly good genes” (qtd. in Smith). Realizing that this statement might seem to contradict the government's own health advice, he went on to say that Trump showed “the significant long-term cardiac and overall health benefits that come from a lifetime of abstinence from tobacco and alcohol” and that “if he had a healthier diet over the last 20 years, he might live to be 200 years old [...] but he has incredibly good genes and it's just the way God made him” (qtd. in Smith). The doctor's announcement was a startling public endorsement of popular eugenic thinking. Even though, according to one 2016 anti-Trump campaign advertisement, Trump's eugenic beliefs should have made him unelectable, it was certainly no secret that the candidate for president had vocally supported this apparently outdated ideology when he won the election (“This May Be”).

The election of a self-declared eugenicist to the most powerful political role should have created far more commentary about popular eugenic ideology than it did. Instead, reporters and opponents focused on controversies surrounding the president's misogyny or his racial and ethnic slurs and prejudices. This lack of discussion indicated a widespread and worrying forgetfulness regarding America's eugenic past. Perhaps commentators were bamboozled by a multitude of apparent contradictions: the mapping of religion onto science in the doctor's 'God and genes' rhetoric, or the overt paradox of a president who denies climate change as a bad science but swears by eugenic ideas that were scientifically outdated by the end of the 1920s. Perhaps these ideas and contradictions seemed so ridiculous that they could not be discussed in seriousness because we have 'real science' to disprove them. Trump's lifelong belief in his genetic superiority (and thereby the truth of eugenics more broadly) is easy to dismiss as just mere scientific ignorance and arrogance, a fringe idea, which pales in importance beside his policy goals and actions on segregation, deportation and walls, and immigration restriction, or his self-declared beliefs in female feebleness, weakness, and innate inability to govern. Yet the failure to properly debate and dismiss eugenic ideology illustrates that the problem goes further than Donald Trump: it shows that a wide-ranging eugenic ideology is embedded in the broader American body politic, one that spans political, social, and religious divisions. It is important, then, that scholars help us to remember and understand the past, making visible the widespread afterlife of eugenics in America today.

### From Obamacare to "Crippled America"

In the 1930s, anxieties over physical decline and 'fitness' for modernity mapped on to anxieties about economic degeneration and the 'recovery' of the nation, and these ideas about personal and national recovery were played out in American popular culture. The popular discourses of recovery, fitness, decline, and supremacy worked to link apparently different and contradictory phenomena that were features of the decade: economic depression; an unprecedented growth of welfare reform; and huge numbers of forced eugenic sterilizations (Currell 1-14). The contemporary popular sphere reflects similar fears of America's waning global power more than ten years into the economic fallout of the 2008 crash: exemplified by the title of Donald Trump's 2015 book *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (inventively changed on a reprint that was rereleased during his election campaign to *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*). What concerned eugenicists in the 1930s, and clearly also Trump more recently, was that increased health and welfare support enabled those with perceived weak or subprime genes to live and breed at cost to taxpayers, thereby crippling the health and recovery of the nation. A popular textbook to educate social workers titled *Administration of Public Welfare* (1940), for example, stated that

[t]he community and the state are concerned not only with the ability of the defective to support himself but also with the possibility that he (and more often she) may have children who will be dependent because of the parent's limited ability to support them or because of the low mentality of the children [...] but whether the condition of the patient is due to hereditary weaknesses or to environmental causes he is as incapable of taking care of himself economically and socially in the one case as the other. [...] Since less than one fourth of all mental defectives discharged from institutions are expected to be fully self-supporting and a smaller proportion still would be able to support a family, it would probably be an advantage to the state to have all of them sterilized. (White 245)

A comparison with Trump might seem far-fetched, but in his 2011 book *Time to Get Tough: Make America #1 Again*, Trump highlighted the cost of disability support as an obstacle to getting America to that number 1 position, stating: "[t]hen there's the disability racket. Did you know that one out of every twenty people in America now claims disability? That adds up to \$170 billion a year in disability checks. Between 2005 and 2009, it is estimated that \$25 billion were eaten up in fraudulent Social Security Disability Insurance filings" (77). It mattered little to Trump that it was the Republican president George Bush who introduced the problematic disabilities act in the 1990s. Of course, "getting tough" is not the same as calling for sterilization, but segregating and deporting costly undesirables and cutting welfare for people with disabilities certainly aligns his vision of making America great with a eugenic vision of national physical and economic improvement. Put alongside Trump's notorious mockery of a disabled journalist during the 2016 election campaign, we see on display a eugenicist's fear of the rising tide of crippled welfare beneficiaries ("Donald Trump Under Fire").

In the 1920s and 1930s, eugenics appealed to conservatives as further proof that races should be kept apart and white supremacy kept firmly in place; but for modernists, reformers, and even some radicals, it was also seen as an efficient way to deal with the problems emerging from a growing nation state, especially with declining tax revenues during the Great Depression—eugenics thereby became a solution that appealed across the political spectrum as a 'scientific' way to create healthier and more intelligent populations, to increase human productivity, and to lead to fewer welfare recipients needing support. The proliferation of welfare and the success of New Deal national health campaigns intensified fears that the cost of supporting the weak would expand inordinately as 'the weak' survived for longer and produced even more welfare recipients (Largent 77-80). Such anxieties led Harvard professor and supporter of eugenics Earnest Hooton to announce at the 1935 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that the United States needed a "biological new deal" to prevent "a progressive deterioration of mankind" as a result of the "reckless and copious breeding of protected inferiors" (Himes 22). Trump's attack on Obamacare as a cause of "crippled America" aligns him with these historic eugenic anxieties.

Curing the crippled body or making a nation into a good place (*Eu-topia*), or even a 'great' one, was, and is, a concern of all political parties, even if the paths to that better place and the definitions of what that better or 'great' place looks like are quite different. As a now discredited pseudo-science of breeding 'better humans' to create a stronger, healthier, and more intelligent populace, the word eugenics stems from the conjunction of two Greek stems: *eu* and *genic*, or 'good / well' and 'born.' Put simply, eugenicists believed that the 'wellborn' should breed to improve the human stock and thereby cure society's problems. This type of 'positive eugenics' encouraged 'proper' breeding and is often considered somewhat benign; more recently, it has been termed 'Progressive Eugenics'—akin to improving wheat yields, or breeding cattle or racehorses. A popular form of this ideology was visible at county, state, and world's fairs in the United States throughout the 1920s and 1930s: eugenic ideology was made popular and visible in health displays such as "Better Baby" contests, beauty pageants, and "Typical American Family" contests (Dorey). In 1939, for example, as America prepared for war against fascism, the New York World's Fair fetishized the "Typical American Family" in a display that evolved directly from the eugenics-sponsored "Better Babies" contests of the 1920s (Rydell 38-58).

Trump also sees his battle with inferiors and the weak as a "knock out" or "fitness" contest. In a 2018 tweet, he wrote that "[c]razy Joe Biden is trying to act like a tough guy. Actually, he is weak, both mentally and physically, and yet he threatens me, for the second time, with physical assault. He doesn't know me, but he would go down fast and hard, crying all the way" (Trump, "Crazy"). Trump's purported superhuman strength is imagined alongside Biden's weakness and femininity. For women, though, physical traits such as beauty indicate their "fitness." Trump's ownership of the Miss Universe, Miss USA, and Miss Teen USA pageants, starting in 1996, ideologically merged his eugenic beliefs with his misogynist predilection to judge women by their physical appearance: in a 2005 interview, he said that "I'm allowed to go in [to the changing rooms], because I'm the owner of the pageant and therefore I'm inspecting it," justifying his entry as an inspection of the quality of his "stock" (Kaczynski, Massie and McDermott).

Trump also puts his "genius," "smart genes," and breeding on display in his popular tweets: in October 2017, he challenged Rex Tillerson to an IQ test, and has written more than 22 tweets about his "high" IQ. The day before he was inaugurated, Trump bragged that the Cabinet he had put together had "by far the highest IQ of any Cabinet ever assembled" (Rucker and Wagner). In a 2013 tweet, Trump wrote: "[s]orry losers and haters, but my I. Q. is one of the highest—and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure, it's not your fault" (Trump, "Sorry").

## Trump's Eugenic Imaginary

This eugenic assumption of supremacy contextualizes Trump's reliance on "trumped up" claims: made up stories, fantasies, or 'make-believe.' 'Make-believe' is a far more appropriate term for Trump's supremacist fantasies and claims than 'lies' or 'fake news,' because it has an imperative construction in operation—making you believe—which indicates the power and aggression in the storytelling process that operates within these playground or 'locker room' comments and contests. Similarly, popular eugenic discourse in the past relied on fiction, fantasy, and make-believe (Seitler). In order to explain their 'science,' eugenicists were forced to invent a narrative of the unseen, the invisible and imagined gene, alongside a speculative narrative of the foreseeable future; in other words, a narrative that could offer a plausible fiction of the real (Nies). Drawing from deeply embedded popular fantasies of renovating and modernizing the body and the body politic, American success / self-help books, science fiction, comics, and films often enabled a eugenic shortcut to the perfect future, bypassing messy political remedies for change. In these imaginative renditions, it was not necessary to adhere to scientific accuracy or consistency. Utopian fiction, for example, prominently featured societies created by eugenic engineering and rationalized social planning—often only a generation or two into the future. In *New Industrial Dawn* (1939) by A. T. Churchill, the protagonist, a banker named Fenton, awakens in the future, after falling into a drunken stupor in 1929, to be greeted by a six-foot tall "Venus" in a eugenically streamlined, perfectly balanced, rational society. Such make-believe tales operated in the popular sphere so easily and effectively because they smooth out the tricky contradictions and hide the violence embedded in eugenic ideology. Political populism utilizes eugenic rhetoric because it so effectively fictionalizes progression to a non-conflicted, better future without the difficulties presented by *realpolitik*: it allows "making" America great again to be visualized as a peaceful erasure of conflict. Imaginatively constructed, eugenics is a science fiction that lends itself to such popular desires for human betterment: to do this it employs literary devices such as suggestion, metaphor, experimental language, and fantasy (Wolff). Trump's rhetoric is no different.

But Trump is not alone. In a warped version of the transatlantic 'special relationship,' American and British eugenicists have shared eugenic beliefs from the time Francis Galton first invented the term. The rhetoric has achieved a new legitimacy in British politics, becoming embedded in conservative attacks on welfare recipients, immigrants, the disabled, and the mentally ill or homeless. On the same day as the president's health check, the British Conservative MP Ben Bradley had to apologize for calling for the "vast sea of unemployed wasters" to undergo sterilization—noting that "vasectomies are free" under the National Health Service ("Tory MP"). British journalist Toby Young similarly blogged

on “Progressive Eugenics” and attended a secret London Conference on Intelligence and IQ, organized by an academic at University College London (Baynes). In 2013, London’s Mayor, Boris Johnson, “mocked the 16 % ‘of our species’ with an IQ below 85 as he called for more to be done to help the 2 % of the population who have an IQ above 130” (Watt).

Trump’s involvement in the ‘Birther’ movement to discredit Obama’s right to the presidency by questioning his American origins might also be linked to this eugenic imagination and penchant for ‘make-believe.’ Eugenic case studies that constructed family histories enabled eugenicists to imagine both past and future population and were used by eugenic case workers to select for sterilization, incarceration, or at best exclusion of the ‘unfit’ from general society (Rafter). Throughout the 1920s, state fair exhibitors selected and displayed a president’s family tree as a popular way of illustrating his eugenic fitness and ‘natural’ right to lead the nation back to health and wellbeing (“International Eugenics Congresses”). The family history is a key tool for constructing a eugenic imaginary, enabling the fictionalizing and visualization of supremacy or degeneracy. The origin of the word ‘idiot’ is laden with deeper fears of the invading ‘other’: the Greek stem *idios* indicates a private person, not connected to the *polis* and thus separated from civilization. Thus, to be without proper documentation or a full ‘family’ history makes you both a genetic threat and an ‘idiot’ in the eyes of the eugenic nationalist. Melding the words idiot and democracy, the popular film *Idiocracy* (Mike Judge, 2006) comically replayed such fears of an American ‘dysgenic’ future. More seriously, however, IQ testing, citizenship tests, genetic histories, and official citizenship documentation have been historically favored methods for eugenicists to control the hidden dysgenic dangers of cosmopolitanism and global migration: as shown in an unpublished utopia written by Francis Galton in the early twentieth century, the perfect future would issue genealogical passports based on intelligence and physical tests following years of eugenic study (Galton). For Galton, the genealogical passport was imagined as the only way to achieve full citizenship; such fiction of course became reality when genealogical passports and genetic registration later became central to the class, race, ethnic, and gender terror of Germany’s Third Reich.

### The Wellborn vs. the Undead

The eugenic imagination thereby relies on an imagined future that might appear as either dream or nightmare; it pejoratively fictionalizes the gene with qualities that are completely unrelated to scientific knowledge. So, the very idea that there is a discrete ‘positive’ or ‘progressive’ eugenics is in itself a fictional device that allows its opposite, ‘negative eugenics,’ to be imagined and implemented. A strong belief in inherited characteristics (including criminality, prostitution, addiction, and intelligence) nurtures and justifies an appetite for the better eugenic future

in those who decide they cannot wait the several generations for a new great world to begin. Negative eugenics in the 1920s turned its attention from the breeding of the 'wellborn' to the prevention of breeding among those considered 'dysgenic' or detrimental to the future of the wellborn, leading to forced segregation (such as incarceration or deportation), immigration controls, de facto segregation, and forms of race terror such as lynching and sterilization for those considered 'unfit' for modernity. Celebrated white supremacist books written in the early part of the century such as Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* (1921) nurtured new immigration legislation employing quotas that would allow only those from populations with eugenically-defined desirable characteristics to enter the country. Such books justified the logic of mass exclusion of national or ethnic groups, repeated today in contemporary American support for building walls and fences to exclude entire populations as 'undesirables,' as for example in Trump's call for the border wall to keep out Mexicans, who he terms "rapists" or criminals, or the "Muslim ban" to keep out terrorists. We might also add to this the chants of "lock her up" for the wayward female "criminal" Hillary.

Trump's language further revealed his eugenic unconscious in January 2018, when he was quoted as asking, in reference to Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries, "[w]hy are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" (Dawsey). In the 1920s, scatological language was similarly used to define the 'dysgenic,' who were often referred to as waste products, white 'trash,' or as having 'cacogenic' traits (*kak* from the Greek for 'bad,' related to *kakkāō*, to defecate)—in one eugenic case study, the family were even given the fictional scatological name of *Kallikak*. Haiti has long been figured as a 'bad' place or dystopia in the American popular imagination—a trope stemming from fear of the revolutionary slave body, epitomized by slave revolution leader Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 1790s. Also significant here are the Haitian origins of the zombie, first mentioned in American fiction in William Seabrook's 1929 novel *The Magic Island*. Seabrook explains that stories of the living dead

ran closely parallel [to those] of the negroes in Georgia and the Carolinas [...] but I recalled one creature I had been hearing about in Haiti, which sounded exclusively local—the *zombie*. It seemed (or so I had been assured by [credulous] negroes [...]) that while the *zombie* came from the grave, it was neither a ghost, nor yet a person who had been raised like Lazarus from the dead. The *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. (93)

Since the 1990s, and more so since the 2008 crash, commentators on the economic crisis have used terms such as 'zombie banks,' 'zombie economy,' and 'voodoo economics' to express fears of a stagnant economy,



which after all stemmed from the subprime mortgage scandal involving mis-selling loans to lower income African Americans (Montgomerie). These economic anxieties segue into Trump's promulgation of fears of a rising tide of 'illegal' and 'crippled' bodies and his claims of voter fraud and 'zombie' voters—'undocumented' or even dead citizens whom he claimed lost him the popular vote. In the 2016 election, CNN reported that Trump's campaign adviser "Rudy Giuliani claimed [...] that Democrats could steal a close election by having dead people vote in inner cities" and that "[d]ead people generally vote for Democrats rather than Republicans" (Bradner). Clearly these fears of the 'undead' rising up in protest link to anxieties over the power of mass protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. Capitalizing on widespread fear of rising unrest and threats to resources and prosperity, Trump's son-in-law and election adviser Jared Kushner aired numerous anti-immigration election advertisements during the commercial breaks of the popular zombie apocalypse series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–). Research had indicated that the popular narrative, depicting the horror of unending zombie hordes attacking 'healthy' survivors, precipitated intensified fears of immigrants threatening traditional American democratic institutions and the nuclear family. This was particularly the case in Texas, where the election advertisements were aired (Bertoni).

By rising from the grave, the zombie is the ultimate 'cacogenic' figure, literally emerging from a dirt-hole. The same year that the zombie was invented in literature, *Crime, Degeneracy and Immigration: Their Interrelations and Interactions* (1929) similarly linked such concerns: "[a] cacogenic person is a potential parent whose hereditary nature is such that the immediate offspring, or the descendant family stock of such person, [...] because of inadequate or defective inheritance [...] would fail to function as socially adequate persons" (Orebaugh 256). The treatment for such persons had been laid out in a book published in 1922, which called for courts "to command the state eugenicist to arrest [...] such particular cacogenic person, and to cause such person to be eugenically sterilized [...]" (Laughlin 449). Inheritance studies which established someone's cacogenic nature enabled the formation of a model sterilization law, which passed into state legislatures and became enshrined in federal law. The 1927 Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* fully legalized eugenic sterilization in the United States, leading to an exponential growth in forced sterilizations during the 1930s. These laws also became the model for Hitler's eugenics program in the 1930s (Lombardo, *Three Generations* 199–218).

More than 60,000 people in the United States have been recorded as victims of involuntary sterilization, but many more were likely never recorded—there is evidence that some victims were unaware that they had undergone sterilization as a juvenile while institutionalized, for example. Even after World War II and the discrediting of Nazi science and policy, forced sterilization in America continued and merged with pop-

ulation control, welfare reform, and environmental concerns. Eugenics stayed 'respectable' enough to garner a truth value that we live with in Donald Trump and other nationalist supremacists. But in focusing only on Trump it is easy to miss the popular eugenic discourse at the heart of the American body politic. Using eugenic discourses of 'normality' and 'health' to attack and dismiss Trump, his opponents likewise employ the uncontested language and terms of the eugenic imagination. Following the publication of Michael Wolff's biography of Trump, *Fire and Fury* (released on January 5, 2018, just before Trump's first health check), it was widely reported that "Donald Trump aides think he may have learning disabilities, dementia or can't read" (Osborne). After all, it was Rex Tillerson calling Trump a "fucking moron" that goaded Trump to challenge him to an IQ test in October 2017 (Pengelly, Siddiqui, and Smith). Many more in the mainstream and social media freely call him an imbecile, a moron, infantile, unstable, mentally disabled, unfit, or just plain old—and thereby fail to challenge the terms of the debate in any form.

### **Eugenics and Progressive Meritocracy**

Eugenic beliefs are present across the political spectrum because they do not threaten the power structure in place, but instead emanate from it. As such, progressives also contribute to the legitimacy of the discourse: eugenic assessments of human value and worth have been embedded in policy and media discussions concerning the environment, intelligence, beauty, fitness, obesity, aging, and poverty across the political spectrum. The presence of modernist left-wing eugenics in reform and welfare culture throughout the 1930s led to the paradox of right-wing politicians accusing Democrats of enacting eugenic policy in our present time: conservatives have argued, for example, that Obamacare, birth control, and women's right to choose is another form of predatory state eugenics, often using Margaret Sanger, the feminist founder of the birth control movement and a virulent eugenicist, as evidence of this historical legacy. The bio-political use of welfare to impose eugenic sterilizations throughout the post-war period and into the 1980s has not been a solely right-wing agenda, as Angela Davis has pointed out. Davis showed that in the post-war period the focus of forced sterilizations switched from poor white subjects to Mexican and Black women welfare recipients (Davis). America's mass incarceration of a disproportionate number of young Black and immigrant male bodies, intensified border control, and racial profiling, as well as problematic environmental concerns with 'overpopulation' and migration, long pre-existed the Trump presidency.

Similarly, environmental groups, whom Trump courted with his claim that the new wall would be a solar panel, have a track record of political support for the Mexican border wall dating from the early twenti-

eth century. Efforts at racial exclusion and environmental control often meet at the border, for “[i]n every phase of construction [of the Mexican border wall], arguments for environmental control have consistently worked to the detriment of human migrants, hardened racial divisions, and reinforced social hierarchies” (Mendoza 119). Paradoxically, by overturning Obama-era environmental controls and the Obama administration’s deregulation of crop and animal biotechnology, as well as human genome editing regulations, Trump is likely to frame himself as an anti-eugenicist and protector of people with disabilities, minorities, and the pro-life community. In fact, more work needs to be done to assess the eugenic legacy of neo-liberalism, which has made it possible for eugenic ideology to remain alive in American popular culture.

The eugenic imagination in America is, and has been in the past, an enduring and popular by-product of capitalism and a bio-political strategy to “Make America Great Again”: it has its grip on everyday life and the American body politic and represents a human rights catastrophe as well as a political failure to imagine a world where value is not profit. My research into the popular eugenic rhetoric of the 1930s has led to several conclusions: that even when scientifically disproven, a popular narrative can get stronger; that the eugenic imaginary is not an extreme fringe belief, but is embedded in everyday ideas such as the quantifiability, value, or desirableness of genius or cleverness; that the eugenic fiction appears to make a person deserving of the power they already hold; and that eugenics is the backbone of political control in a progressive meritocracy. In times of economic and social stress, eugenic discourse presents an easy and typically American remedy that feeds from and into mainstream ideals of progress, while hiding its power and fabrications behind a facade of scientific objectivity and hope. Trump’s election and popular eugenic imagination illustrates a personal and collective failure to understand and counteract the discourse of eugenics in the past as well as the present. The human rights catastrophe unfolding in many parts of the world is closely linked with this collective failure to see the legacy of eugenics. The essays in this volume will help us to take steps forward out of such failure.

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